

WILLIAM JAMES AND WELL-BEING:  
THE PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND CULTURE  
OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

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What is the value of philosophy? This question is quite familiar to philosophers. We have no doubt heard it from the time we started studying philosophy. Our friends asked us why we had decided to major in such a peculiar discipline. Our concerned parents asked us about our intended life path. And even strangers weighed in with their questions. When I was in graduate school, a typical response from new acquaintances upon learning that I was getting my Ph.D. in philosophy was, “What are you going to do with *that*?” The puzzled look in the stranger’s eye, accompanied by at least gentle disapproval, implied that philosophy was lacking in the sort of value that would justify its study. Although we have heard questions about the value of our discipline throughout our lives, they are being asked more insistently these days and with less gentle disapproval.<sup>1</sup>

What is the value of philosophy? This question is familiar to us for other reasons as well: It is, itself, an important philosophical question. Our teachers raised this question in our first classes in the discipline, and we now discuss it with our own students. We also give it a fair amount of thought outside of classrooms as we reflect on our own lives—and the time and dedication we give to philosophy.

What is the value of philosophy? How do you answer this question for your students and for yourself? Perhaps you quote Socrates’s observation that “the unexamined life is not worth living,” and you note that philosophy is important because it can help us examine our lives and become more aware of our own and others’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Perhaps you point out how philosophy can help us learn to think more clearly, to create sound arguments, and to protect ourselves against the unsound reasoning of others. Or perhaps you observe that ethics, one of the most important branches of philosophy, can help us make good moral decisions and develop virtuous habits.

These answers are wrong, of course. At least if you ask an increasing number of university administrators, politicians, parents, and students who want to know the economic value of

philosophy. Do philosophy departments carry their own weight financially, or are they a drag on the university budget? And what about the earning potential of philosophy graduates? In the words of one recent presidential candidate, “Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers.”<sup>2</sup> The implication here is that we need to train students for good-paying jobs, and philosophy does not do that. Even though it turns out that welders do not actually make more money than philosophers, the financial prospects of philosophy graduates are an influential consideration for parents and their college-age children.<sup>3</sup>

We may be tempted to downplay what seems to us to be an overemphasis on the economic value of philosophy. Looming even larger in our own lives, no doubt, is its professional value. We understand that if we become experts in a certain area of philosophy and work hard to publish our views, we may be able to land a coveted tenure-track job in a college or university. Or as these are becoming more and more rare, we may be able to find other ways of establishing ourselves in philosophy. Within the range of available roles in the discipline, there is a variety of specific ways in which we can focus our efforts to further our professional reputations and advance our careers.

For our students, philosophy has a strong academic value. For those majoring in the discipline, taking the right number and distribution of classes is necessary for the earning of their degree. And success in those classes requires the development of a range of academic skills, including, among others, careful reading, effective processing of academic content, and clear writing.

There are specific ways of measuring the economic, professional, and academic value of philosophy. We may disagree with some of these processes, but budget spreadsheets, periodic reviews, and grade point averages provide clear metrics for assessing the effectiveness of these various uses of philosophy. Moreover, there are institutional structures in place to maximize the economic, professional, and academic value of philosophy with employees whose everyday task it is to increase this value.

Yet I suspect these economic, professional, and academic matters are not what first drew most of us to philosophy. Nor are they the considerations that first drew William James to a life of learning. Throughout history, a far greater motivator for the study of philosophy than economic, professional, or academic concerns have been eudaimonic ones.<sup>4</sup> It is not so much what we are going to do with philosophy, but what philosophy may do with us that provides a deeper motivation for its study. Important here are the ways in which philosophy makes a difference to our well-being. William James did not meet with the members of the Metaphysical Club because he was excited about monetizing the ideas they discussed, nor because he thought it was a great career move, and certainly not because he thought it would hone his academic skills. He met with them because they were discussing important questions that mattered for life. My guess is that those of us who have spent a significant part of our lives engaging William James's thought have done so because we have been attracted to his discussion of important questions that matter for life. If asked, we could no doubt articulate various ways in which James's thought has been important for our own well-being.

Well-being was certainly important for James. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he wrote:

If we were to ask the question: "What is human life's chief concern?" one of the answers we should receive would be: "It is happiness." How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, James's personal struggles to gain, keep, and recover happiness are well-known, as he wrestled with psychological, physical, and intellectual obstacles to his own well-being. In this paper, I would like to look at James's professional efforts to articulate and defend the eudaimonic value of philosophy, psychology, and culture. In a Jamesian spirit of growth and

progress, I will mention some of James's views in each of these areas and then discuss a selection of current developments in these domains that I think continue to carry James's work forward in powerful and promising ways.

### WELL-BEING AND PHILOSOPHY

James, of course, was one of the foundational figures of pragmatism, the most significant home-grown school of philosophy in the United States. I would like to focus here on meliorism, one of the most important themes of pragmatism. John Stuhr argues in the introduction to his anthology of *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy* that meliorism is one of the themes that stands at the center of the classical American philosophical tradition. If we look at the work of classical American philosophers, we see it is William James who makes the most extensive use of this term. Apparently coined by George Eliot in a letter written in 1877, meliorism is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the "doctrine that the world, or society, may be improved and suffering alleviated through rightly directed human effort."<sup>6</sup> The related and more familiar terms *optimism* and *pessimism* come from Latin superlatives—from *optimus*, meaning "best," and *pessimus*, meaning "worst." Meliorism, by contrast, comes from a Latin comparative, *melior*, meaning "better." Meliorism literally means "better-ism" but is used to mean "betterable-ism."

James, in his final lecture in *Pragmatism*, which is entitled "Pragmatism and Religion," contrasts meliorism with optimism and pessimism regarding the "salvation of the world." For James, optimism holds that the salvation of the world is inevitable, and pessimism holds that it is impossible. Meliorism, on the other hand, holds that the salvation of the world is possible and that it depends on the efforts of human beings. James argues that "pragmatism must incline towards meliorism."<sup>7</sup> He contends that most of us have a "healthy-minded buoyancy" that makes a melioristic universe a good fit for us. We welcome opportunities to make meaningful moral contributions to the universe, even though

such opportunities mean that the salvation of the world is not guaranteed. James also acknowledges, however, that not everyone would welcome living in such a world of risk. All of us, some of the time, and some of us all of the time, would rather have more security than this melioristic universe can afford. But James argues that such an attitude indicates a fear of experience, a fear of life, and although he admits that we do not yet know for sure which view of the universe will work out best in the long run, he himself opts for the pragmatic position of meliorism.<sup>8</sup>

A few years later, in an appendix to the posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy*, James expounds further on the nature of meliorism, contrasting it with intellectualism. In the appendix, titled “Faith and the Right to Believe,” James defines intellectualism as “the belief that our mind comes upon a world complete in itself, and has the duty of ascertaining its contents; but has no power of re-determining its character, for that is already given.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, of course, both optimism and pessimism are intellectualistic ways of seeing the world. Both presuppose that the world’s moral quality is already predetermined. Meliorism, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of human agency for the determination of the world’s moral quality. James writes:

The melioristic universe is conceived after a *social* analogy, as a pluralism of independent powers. It will succeed just in proportion as more of these work for its success. If none work, it will fail. If each does his best, it will not fail. Its destiny thus hangs on an *if* or on a lot of *ifs*—which amounts to saying (in the technical language of logic) that the world being as yet unfinished, its total character can be expressed only by *hypothetical* and not by *categorical* propositions.<sup>10</sup>

This is a point that was taken up a decade later by John Dewey, also very much a meliorist. As Ralph W. Sleeper contends, meliorism is “central to [Dewey’s] conception of philosophy from

the beginning.”<sup>11</sup> Even so, Dewey uses the term itself quite infrequently (fewer than ten times) in his writings. In fact, aside from a few dictionary and encyclopedia entries (references to William James and the like), Dewey takes up the term only once. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, Dewey contrasts meliorism with pessimism and optimism. He points out that pessimism is a “paralyzing doctrine.”<sup>12</sup> If the world is thoroughly evil, then we have no incentive for trying to fight against any particular part of it that is evil. Dewey then goes on to claim that optimism is just as paralyzing:

[Optimism] in declaring that good is already realized in ultimate reality tends to make us gloss over the evils that concretely exist. It becomes too readily the creed of those who live at ease, in comfort, of those who have been successful in obtaining this world’s rewards. Too readily optimism makes the men who hold it callous and blind to the sufferings of the less fortunate, or ready to find the cause of troubles of others in their personal viciousness. It thus cooperates with pessimism, in spite of the extreme nominal differences between the two, in benumbing sympathetic insight and intelligent effort in reform.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, meliorism, he contends, is the opposite of paralyzing. “It encourages intelligence to study the positive means of good and the obstructions to their realization, and to put forth endeavor for the improvement of conditions.”<sup>14</sup>

Both James and Dewey agree that meliorism introduces a salubrious human agency into the question of the ultimate moral worth of the world. The moral quality of the world depends, at least in part, on our efforts. This is a powerful view, and I would like to suggest a distinction that I believe will make the conception of meliorism even more helpful. It is a distinction at which both

James and Dewey hinted, but which neither fully developed. I invite you to explore this distinction with me by means of a thought experiment.

Imagine you run across a flea market near your home, and in one of the stalls you see a lamp for sale. On a whim, you buy it. When you get home, you decide to give the lamp a cleaning, and as you rub it, you realize it is a magic lamp. To your amazement, a genie pops out of the lamp and addresses you by name, telling you she has been looking forward to meeting you. She informs you that she is so impressed by you and what you are doing to help make the world a better place that she has decided to transform you into a superhero. But first she needs you to make a decision. What color would you like your cape to be? There are two options. If you choose a red cape, you will have powers to fight against the things in the world we do not want—things like violence, injustice, and hunger. If, on the other hand, you choose a green cape, you will have powers to help foster the things in the world we do want, things like harmony, love, and abundance. So, which would you choose: the red cape, or the green cape?

If you choose the red cape, you might do so out of a consideration that it is more important to fight against the things we do not want in the world, since they threaten the lives and well-being of everyone on earth. You may also think that the elimination of the things we do not want will give an opportunity for the things we do want to grow on their own. Alternatively, if you choose the green cape, you might do so because you think there are cases where getting what we want automatically gets rid of what we do not want. Abundance takes care of hunger. Or you might think that using the green cape would be more enjoyable than using the red cape. Regardless of which cape you are initially attracted to, which *should* you choose?

This is a difficult question, and the point of this thought experiment is actually not to determine which cape is right and which is wrong. Rather, the point is to demonstrate that they are *different*. The life of a red-cape superhero would be very different from the life of a green-cape superhero. A red-cape superhero



would look for problems in the world. They would, of course, find plenty of them and would have a very meaningful life working to resolve those problems. A green-cape superhero, on the other hand, would look for opportunities in the world. They would find many of them and would have a very meaningful life working to realize those opportunities.

These results of our thought experiment point to two different types of meliorism. I call the red-cape variety “mitigative meliorism” and the green-cape variety “constructive meliorism.” Although they are related, they are not identical, and getting clear about them can help us become more effective meliorists.

In 1877, in what is perhaps the first published use of the term, James Sully describes meliorism as “the faith which affirms not merely our power of lessening evil—this nobody questions—but also our ability to increase the amount of positive good.”<sup>15</sup> Note Sully’s view that lessening evil and increasing good may be related, but that they are not identical. Sully is here distinguishing between what I have called mitigative and constructive meliorism.

William James, in “The Will to Believe,” identifies two different epistemological “commandments”: “*We must know the truth; and we must avoid error....*”<sup>16</sup> James insists that they are not simply two ways of stating the same commandment, but that they are two different laws. He points out, for example, that by obeying the first, we may well, in so doing, obey the second. (If we believe the truth about something, we may automatically avoid believing what is not true about it.) But he argues that obeying the second hardly ever automatically entails obeying the first. (If we avoid one error, we may just as likely fall into another error as into the truth.) He also points out that our emphasis on one or the other of these commandments has a significant impact on our whole intellectual life. If our attention is focused on avoiding error, we will experience life very differently than if it is focused on believing truth. W. K. Clifford, to James’s mind, is someone who is focused far too strongly on avoiding error. This focus gets generalized into the “scientific veto” that tries to circumscribe religious and moral beliefs. In critiquing Clifford and defending a positive emphasis on

believing truth, James is trying to find a healthier balance between these two commandments.

In his 1908 *Ethics*, John Dewey makes use of a similar conceptual difference in the moral realm. He points out that the life of virtue requires both “belief in the realizability of good in spite of all obstacles,” and “a certain intellectual pessimism, in the sense of a steadfast willingness to uncover sore points, to acknowledge and search for abuses, to note how presumed good often serves as a cloak for actual bad.”<sup>17</sup> Although he puts his point in terms of optimism and pessimism in this passage, he is really writing about two moments of meliorism. And we can now see these two moments at play in the passage, cited above, from *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, where he points out that meliorism encourages both the study of “the positive means of good” and “the obstructions to their realization.”<sup>18</sup>

Consider a gardener who uses only a red cape. She can be as diligent as can be about pulling weeds, but if she never gets around to planting seeds, she will not have a harvest. Her neighbor, who uses only a green cape, will not be much better off. He plants the seeds, but because he does not pull the weeds, his plants will get choked out, and he is just as unlikely to have a harvest.

From this point of view, we can see that both the red cape and the green cape are important. Effective meliorism requires attention to both the mitigative and constructive moments. Different contexts require different emphases. As Dewey points out, there are occasions when we need to make a point of looking for what is not working. Not because we want to become pessimists, but because this can keep us from becoming complacent with the status quo and accepting the “all’s well” optimism of those in power. In many aspects of our lives, however, it is all too easy to fixate on what is not working. In these situations, we may well need to increase our use of constructive meliorism to help us achieve balance and make more effective progress. This is especially true in those situations where, as James says, “faith in a fact can help create the fact.”<sup>19</sup> And it is all the

more true if James is right, that progress ultimately requires trust among the various powers in the universe.<sup>20</sup>

With this philosophical distinction in mind between mitigative and constructive meliorism, let us now turn to psychology to see what kind of cash value it may have.

### **WELL-BEING AND PSYCHOLOGY**

Well-being was one of the things that fueled James's interest in psychology. His *Principles of Psychology* contains a variety of hortatory passages on topics as wide ranging as attention, belief, action, habit, and will, where James indicates how the topic he is addressing can be of practical benefit. Near the end of his life, James presented a program for a new area of psychology which would focus on one aspect of constructive meliorism: how to raise our levels of mental and moral energy.

James served as the president of the American Philosophical Association in 1906. In December of that year, he gave his presidential address, titled "The Energies of Men." He observes that we often feel like we are functioning below our capacity:

Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of feeling more or less alive on different days. Everyone knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of that day do not call forth, but which he might display if these were greater. Most of us feel as if we lived habitually with a sort of cloud weighing on us, below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with that we ought to be, we are only half-awake. Our fires are damped, our drafts are checked. We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources.<sup>21</sup>

To demonstrate that we do, indeed, have stores of energy that we do not normally tap into, James refers to a familiar experience. When we feel like we are out of energy, we typically stop to rest. But there are occasions when for some reason we feel like we cannot stop. Perhaps we are facing a deadline, or someone is counting on the outcome of our efforts. If we continue past our exhaustion point, the work gets harder, to a point—and then we often tap into a new reservoir of energy, a “second wind,” and sometimes even a third or a fourth “wind.” This makes evident, not only that we have more energy than we typically access, but that it is also possible to tap into that energy. James notes three specific ways for doing so. First is through emotional excitements, when we need to rise to the occasion in some way, either on normal occasions like getting a new job, or during extraordinary events like shipwreck or warfare. Second is through volitional efforts. We may intentionally set out to raise our levels of energy through methodic efforts of will, as did one of James’s friends by taking up a rigorous program of yoga. Third, abstract ideas like country, flag, the Union, church, truth, science, liberty, and loyalty can awaken these new levels of energy.

However these levels are accessed, James argues, having our energy levels raised is the most important thing that can happen to us. In a later revision of his presidential address, he argues that learning how to raise our levels of energy is crucially important for ethics, economics, and education.<sup>22</sup> For ethics, he contends, high energy is necessary for being able to fulfill our potential for the good life. For economics, he holds that the closer individual citizens come to fulfilling their potential, the greater will be the economic output of their country. Given the importance of these energy levels, James continues, educators need to focus on helping young people learn how to access their most useful levels of energy. James is not arguing, of course, that adolescents simply learn how to become frenetic. He has in mind here not only the quantity of energy available but also its quality.

Since these questions of human energy and its cultivation are so important, James laments that they have been left to moralists,

mind-curers, and doctors, and argues for the founding of a new branch of empirical psychology to study these matters scientifically. James's program for this new field of study is two-fold. First, it will need to take up the problem of our powers. James writes, "We ought somehow to get a topographic survey made of the limits of human power in every conceivable direction, something like an ophthalmologist's chart of the limits of the human field of vision." Second, it will need to take up the problem of means. He writes, "[W]e ought . . . to construct a methodical inventory of the paths of access, or keys, differing with the diverse types of individual, to the different kinds of power."<sup>23</sup>

Since his address, psychologists, instead of following James's program, have tended to investigate very different lines of inquiry from the ones he laid out. In the last twenty years, however, there has been a surge of interest in the kinds of questions James had in mind. In 1998, the psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman served as the President of the American Psychological Association. In his address to that association, he observed that psychology had become focused on the identification and treatment of mental illness and had largely ignored the identification and cultivation of psychological strengths.<sup>24</sup> In our terminology, psychology had become a red-cape discipline emphasizing mitigative meliorism and had left to one side green-cape approaches for constructive meliorism. Seligman argued for a rebalancing of psychology and announced the field of "positive psychology" to complement the orientation of mainstream psychology. His address received a standing ovation, and the field was launched.

Since then, positive psychology has grown rapidly. It has been defined as a "science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions"<sup>25</sup> whose aim is to "discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive."<sup>26</sup> Although positive psychologists acknowledge and respect the importance of treating mental illness, they believe a balanced approach toward well-being is likely to be the most effective for fostering human flourishing. Hundreds of millions of research dollars have now been awarded to study what

goes right with human beings and how to cultivate it. Academic journals have been founded to publish the results of this research. Scientists regularly meet at conferences around the world to discuss the latest findings, and an International Positive Psychology Association has been established to support this research and its evidence-based application and to bring together scientists and practitioners across the globe. In 2005, the University of Pennsylvania started the first degree program in positive psychology to help train the next generation of researchers and practitioners, and there are now some twenty post-graduate programs in this field around the world.

A careful look at current work in positive psychology shows the field is developing in two modes.<sup>27</sup> First is the complementary mode, where it is providing a counterweight to mainstream psychology's emphasis on mental disease by focusing on mental strengths. In this way, it is a green-cape science of constructive meliorism. It is also, however, functioning in a comprehensive mode, investigating the best approaches to human flourishing, regardless of their orientation. In this mode, positive psychology is bringing together the red cape and the green cape into a single reversible cape, with one side red and the other green, understanding that both sides are indispensable for well-being. Positive psychology also understands, however, that given our propensity to use the red side of the cape more often and to focus most of our investigations on how to improve its use, a balanced approach requires increased study of how to use the green side more frequently and more effectively.

One of the key early projects in positive psychology that seems particularly close to James's concerns in "The Energies of Men" is the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues. This classification was created from a realization that the system currently in use for mental evaluation was thoroughly mitigative. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is an important tool developed by the American Psychiatric Association for diagnosing hundreds of mental illnesses. Valuable as this tool is, it does not include what James was interested in: a way to assess

human powers. To complement the scope of the *DSM*, positive psychologists have created a classification of character strengths and virtues which they refer to as the “manual of the sanities.”<sup>28</sup> This classification was created by looking to cultures around the world and throughout history to see what character strengths and virtues have been ubiquitously valued. The resulting classification consists of six virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence), with twenty-four character strengths (like creativity, integrity, kindness, citizenship, prudence, and hope) ranged under them. Positive psychologists have created the VIA Survey of Character Strengths and Virtues, which functions remarkably like James’s ophthalmologist’s chart to assess the level of these strengths in individuals.<sup>29</sup> Positive Psychology is also using a range of other methods to study these and similar aspects of human powers.<sup>30</sup>

Like any science, positive psychology is finding its way through trial and error. It is still a relatively new approach, and much research remains to be done to extend its methods and further establish its results. I think, though, that James would be fascinated by positive psychology, happy that the study of human powers is no longer being left only to moralists, mind-curers, and doctors. We now have a branch of empirical psychology that is studying, scientifically, the important concerns James laid out more than a century ago. And we can see the cash value of making a distinction between the two moments of meliorism, so that we can ensure balanced attention to both mitigative and constructive efforts to improve our lives, our communities, and our world.

Interest in these matters is now so serious and sustained that it makes sense to talk of a “eudaimonic turn,” a turn toward well-being occurring in a variety of domains beyond psychology.<sup>31</sup> These domains include psychiatry, medicine, neuroscience, economics, sociology, business, and education, among others. One remarkable feature of this list is the diversity of disciplines and professions it includes. Just as remarkable, however, is the absence of the humanities. The eudaimonic turn has not yet had as significant an effect in the humanities as it has in some other

disciplines, although this is likely to change soon. In the next section, we will turn to an examination of some significant possibilities in this area, beginning with an example from James to illustrate the importance of considerations of well-being in the humanities and across culture.

### **WELL-BEING AND CULTURE**

One of James's most important and influential works is *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in which he examines matters that are centrally important to cultures around the world. He asks the question of religion that we asked of philosophy at the beginning of this address: What is the value of religion? And the value he was interested in exploring was not economic, professional, or academic. Rather, it was eudaimonic. In part for this reason, he decided to focus not on the beliefs or practices of institutional religion, but on the experiences of personal religion. With this in mind, we can frame the central question of *Varieties* as follows: "What is the eudaimonic value of religious experience?"

James begins his answer to this question by arguing that origins are insufficient to establish value. He holds that we cannot, for example, establish the eudaimonic value of religious experiences based on their supernatural origins. This is because claims to supernatural origin of religious experience are in such conflict that it would be impossible to sort out which, if any, of these experiences do actually have such origins. Nor, James argues, can we dismiss the eudaimonic value of religious experiences based on any pathological origins. If an idea is true and valuable, it does not matter whether it was first suggested by someone suffering from a mental illness of some sort. James argues that we should judge the value of religious experiences by their fruits and not by their roots. And he claims that the methods we need to use to make these judgments must be empirical, grounded in the actual experiences of real individuals. Let us consider the results of James's assessment of the eudaimonic value of religion in general, as well as of particular aspects of religion, like conversion, saintliness, and mysticism.



With regard to religion in general, James says it has a distinct practical value over mere morality. Both religion and morality, he argues, are ways of acknowledging our dependence on the universe, our mortality, and our other limitations. Morality, he claims, helps us come to terms with this dependence by means of dutiful submission and volitional acquiescence. Religion, on the other hand, allows for a joyful acceptance and enthusiastic espousal of this dependence. And, James argues, religious joy and enthusiasm can come by means of the more simple experiences of healthy-minded religion, where natural good is maximized, or by means of the more complex experiences of sick-souled religion, where natural good is given up in favor of supernatural good. James concludes that since we have to come to terms with our own dependence, religion of either type provides the important eudaimonic benefit of making “*easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary.*”<sup>32</sup>

In the case of specific aspects of religious experience like conversion, saintliness, and mysticism, James also finds specific eudaimonic benefits. With respect to conversion, James points out that it is not universal and argues that it is not universally superior, either. That is, not everyone experiences conversion, and not all those who do lead better lives than those who do not. He suggests, however, that those who do experience conversion probably lead better lives than they otherwise would have, since it can unify a heterogeneous personality and can result in eudaimonic benefits like reduced anxiety, a perceived access to new truth, a sense of the renewal of one’s world, and even ecstatic happiness. He observes that although the feelings of the converted fluctuate, it seems that these eudaimonic benefits are fairly constant and durable.

With respect to saintliness, James argues that there is a core of characteristics of saintliness across all religions and that this core includes the sensing of a transcendent power that takes us beyond the selfish interests of our daily lives; a friendly connection to this transcendent power and a willing surrender of the self to it; a great sense of joy and freedom; and increased loving and harmonious affections, which move us toward “‘yes, yes’ and away from

‘no.’”<sup>33</sup> Although liable to excesses, saintliness, in James’s view, can bring tremendous eudaimonic value. He observes, “the best fruits of religious experience are the best things that history has to show.”<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, James claims that there are core characteristics to mystical experiences across religions, including ineffability, a noetic quality, transiency, and passivity. And although he acknowledges that mysticism can sometimes lead to useless “stupefaction,” he argues that it is the basis of all personal religious experience and can lead to “indomitable spirit and energy.”<sup>35</sup> This is a high evaluation, indeed, when we remember that, for James, having our level of energy raised is the most important thing that can happen to us.

James’s analysis of religious experience provides a useful model for extending the eudaimonic turn into the humanities. The question to be asked of each discipline is, “What is the eudaimonic value of this discipline?” An answer to this question must address both its mitigative effects on decreasing ill-being and its constructive effects on increasing well-being. Following James’s example in *Varieties*, it must also make use of the best empirical methods available for assessing this value. I believe a Jamesian approach to this question of value in the humanities provides a powerful program for further work, and I will conclude with a few thoughts on the melioristic and empirical nature of this endeavor, as well as some caveats that will need to be kept in mind.

In considering the eudaimonic value of the various disciplines in the humanities, it will be important to adopt a balanced melioristic approach that emphasizes both red-cape mitigative outcomes and green-cape constructive ones. As Seligman pointed out in the case of psychology, the humanities have tended in the last few decades to focus in an imbalanced way on the mitigative side of things. In the field of literary studies, for example, Rita Felski has pointed out in her books *Uses of Literature* and *The Limits of Critique* that critical theory has become hegemonic in that discipline, and that this has led to an overbearing emphasis on the negative.<sup>36</sup> Another literary scholar, Don Moores, observes that

critical theory frequently employs what Paul Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” focusing on reading texts against the grain to discover hidden meanings and reveal the presence of psychopathology and the pernicious influence of unhealthy ideologies. As Moores points out, this approach can be useful for identifying obstacles to well-being, but is less valuable for understanding well-being itself and for learning how to cultivate it. For these purposes, Moores suggests that what Ricoeur calls a “hermeneutics of affirmation” is likely to be more helpful.<sup>37</sup>

In considering the eudaimonic value of the various disciplines in the humanities, it will also be important to use the best empirical methods available. This calls for a close and sustained collaboration between the humanities and science. Because human flourishing is such a complex matter, we must work to overcome the separation between the “two cultures” identified by C. P. Snow.<sup>38</sup> As Walter Isaacson argues—and as his biographies of Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs attest—science and the humanities work better together than separately.<sup>39</sup> In particular, we need to foster a collaboration between the science of well-being and the culture of human flourishing. This collaboration holds great promise for both the humanities and the sciences. The humanities can provide science with new insights into the concept of well-being and various means for cultivating human flourishing. At the same time, science can provide a growing array of methods for helping to measure the eudaimonic outcomes of the humanities.

When undertaking this melioristic and collaborative work, there are several caveats we must keep in mind. First, we must be clear that we are not proposing to measure the humanities. It is not apparent what that would even mean. Nor are we intending to reduce the complexity of the humanities to a set of numbers. What we are proposing, however, is that just as James argues in his emphasis on the fruits of religious experience, engagement with the humanities has real eudaimonic effects. Finding ways of measuring at least some of these effects can add to our knowledge and advance the work of increasing those effects.

A second caveat we must keep in mind is that as with all scientific work, the results we obtain will be fallible. To minimize the likelihood of error, we must employ methodological pluralism and include a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory research, for example, can help with conceptual clarification; and questionnaires, physiological measures, data science, and experiments can help us understand how these concepts play out in the experience of individuals across a range of contexts. Representative and longitudinal samples will be key to this work. But even with this mix of approaches, our results will be fallible and will need to be understood in collaboration with a range of methodological approaches in the humanities for the creation and application of knowledge.

Third, we must reject the simplistic notion that the humanities increase human flourishing in all contexts. Empirical investigation will surely yield nuanced results. It is to be expected that some forms of engagement with the humanities will lead to important melioristic effects in certain contexts. It is also to be expected that there are other contexts in which they may be not affect human flourishing at all or may even be detrimental to it. Furthermore, human flourishing is such a complex matter that different types of engagement with the humanities will no doubt have different sorts of effects for various dimensions of flourishing. The goal here is not to demonstrate that the humanities always enhance all kinds of human flourishing, but rather to study the conditions under which different types of engagement in the humanities affect various human flourishing outcomes, how they do so, and when the effects are positive, neutral, or negative.<sup>40</sup>

With these caveats in mind, I believe the melioristic and empirical investigation of the eudaimonic value of the humanities holds great promise. If executed well, this investigation may give us new ways of answering the question, “What is the value of philosophy?” And these answers are likely to be more intrinsic to the discipline than considerations of its economic, professional, and academic value. These efforts will include other disciplines, as

well, allowing us to ask the question, “What is the eudaimonic value of the humanities?” This work promises new answers to that question and, even more importantly, to the question of how we can optimize the well-being effects of the humanities: “What *can* the eudaimonic value of the humanities be?” This final question gets at the kind of cash value that greatly interested James about ideas and their investigation. Not only will the knowledge created be important in its own right, but it can also guide the development of evidence-based policy and practice that can optimize the eudaimonic effects of participation in the humanities. Who knows whether this will lead to the “salvation of the world,” but perhaps it is one small yet important step we can take in that direction.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This question of value is not limited to philosophy but extends across the humanities. I use the example of philosophy

here because I am a philosopher. Those who come from different disciplines in the humanities should feel free to substitute their own discipline.

<sup>2</sup> Youngman, “Marco Rubio Said Wrongly.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I use the term *eudaimonic* in a general sense to indicate happiness, well-being, and human flourishing. Beyond that, I do not mean to espouse any particular philosophical or psychological position.

<sup>5</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. “melioration.”

<sup>7</sup> James, *Pragmatism*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 139–44.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 111.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>11</sup> Sleeper, “Introduction,” ix.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Dewey elsewhere credits pessimism with pointing out the problems with optimism and with helping to transform it into meliorism.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Meliorism.”

<sup>16</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” 24 (italics in original).

<sup>17</sup> Dewey, *Ethics*, 371.

<sup>18</sup> Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> James, “The Will to Believe,” 29.

<sup>20</sup> James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, 116.

<sup>21</sup> James, “The Energies of Men,” 131.

<sup>22</sup> See James, “The Powers of Men.”

<sup>23</sup> James, “The Energies of Men,” 145.

<sup>24</sup> Seligman, “The President’s Address,” 559.

<sup>25</sup> Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology,” 5.

<sup>26</sup> Sheldon, Fredrickson, Rathunde, Csikszentmihalyi, and Haidt, “Positive Psychology Manifesto,” 1.



- <sup>27</sup> See Pawelski, “Defining the ‘Positive’” Part I and Part II.
- <sup>28</sup> Peterson and Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, 4.
- <sup>29</sup> [www.viainstitute.org](http://www.viainstitute.org).
- <sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*; Pawelski, “William James,” 61–64; and Pawelski, “Is Healthy-Mindedness Healthy?,” 408–09.
- <sup>31</sup> Pawelski, “What is the Eudaimonic Turn?,” 3.
- <sup>32</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 49 (italics in original).
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 327–28.
- <sup>36</sup> See Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 1-3 and Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 1–3.
- <sup>37</sup> See Moores’s “The Eudaimonic Turn in Literary Studies,” 27.
- <sup>38</sup> Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, 1.
- <sup>39</sup> See Isaacson’s “The Intersection of the Humanities.”
- <sup>40</sup> See Tay, Pawelski, and Keith, “The Role of the Arts,” 1–2.